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ABSTRACT

With the recent interest in the fifth century B.C. theories of Protagoras and Gorgias come assumptions about the philosophical affinity of the Greek educator Isocrates to this pair of older sophists. Isocratean education in discourse, with its emphasis on collaborative political discourse, falls within recent definitions of a sophist curriculum. That is, skills learned in the sophistic classroom are applied directly to the "polis." Examination of Isocrates' writings shows that, for Isocrates, the most useful discourse is that which has a social end. Overall, Isocrates's educational theory favors social interaction through language, as well as probable rather than absolute knowledge. One element missing from contemporary composition instruction is just such an emphasis on public discourse. Furthermore, neo-sophistic pedagogical strategies can be based on Isocratean as well as Protagorean theory. These strategies allow students to voice their views publicly about localized student and community issues. Such assignments will involve not only written forums but also oral and electronic forums that are collaborative and epistemic in nature. Finally, the notion that the fostering of citizenship is an achievable goal in composition classes should not be overlooked, especially as instructors aid students in realizing that they can become part of ongoing public dialogues. (HB)

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Isocratean Discourse Theory and Neo-Sophistic Pedagogy: Implications for the Composition Classroom

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With the recent interest in the fifth-century BCE theories of Protagoras and Gorgias come assumptions about the philosophical affinity of the Greek educator Isocrates to this pair of older sophists.

Born in 436, Isocrates is often considered a sophist, despite some of his written efforts to distinguish himself from this group of traveling teachers. He studied with both Gorgias and Socrates, among others, and after writing forensic speeches from 404-393, he opened one of the first permanent schools of rhetoric, and ultimately became a rival with Plato for students. Like many sophists, Isocrates took pupils for pay, though his claim was that he needed money after family losses in the Pelopponesian war. A vocal proponent of the Pan-Hellenic ideal, Isocrates devoted his skills to political discourse, though he was not known to speak publicly. He died in 338, a prominent figure in Athenian society and the author of some thirty known works, including the Panegyricus, the Helen, On the Peace, Against the Sophists, and the Antidosis, texts I will focus upon in this paper.

My purpose is twofold: (1) to show how Isocratean education in discourse logon paideia, with its emphasis on collaborative political discourse, falls within recent definitions of a sophistic curriculum and (2) to present neo-sophistic pedagogical strategies based on Isocratean as well as Protagorean theory, strategies by which students publicly voice their views in assignments about localized student and community issues. Such assignments will involve not only written forums but also oral and electronic forums that are collaborative and epistemic in nature.

Before providing specifics showing that Isocrates' education and discourse theories typify a sophistic curriculum, it is important to define just what we mean by sophistic, as the term has often been applied to most

teachers of the fifth and fourth centuries, regardless of the political, philosophical, and epistemological divergences between these individuals. As Susan Jarratt notes, sophistic education is distinct from most contemporary composition praxis in that the reasoning and literacy skills learned in the sophistic classroom were applied directly to the polis (84). In this sense, a sophistic education is equivalent to a political education. This link between the classroom and the political arena is also tied to epistemology, for the knowledge that teachers such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Isocrates offered was social in form, located within specific cultures rather than within the ideal forms of knowledge promoted by Plato. Jasper Neel contends that "sophistry" acknowledges the awareness that it is language that influences standards of opinion or truth and that such standards can be made only through the public voicing of both sides of an issue (207). Here, Neel utilizes the Protagorean concept of strong vs. weak discourse, a process that ensures that personal, untested views become part of the public domain, so that they can be modified or replaced through exposure to more informed views. Hence a sophistic education enables citizens to make decisions in a realm of contingency and competing logoi. Although Athenian democracy, with its restrictions on citizenship and acceptance of slavery, hardly seems democratic today, sophistic education can provide those with less ability but equal training and practice, a change to participate in a more democratic forum than is proposed by Plato.

Given Jarratt and Neel's emphasis on public, political discourse as a distinguishing feature of sophistic education, Isocrates' own privileging of political discourse shows his overall emphasis on the role of language in a society, for Isocrates holds that it is primarily in the Athenian assembly that

language becomes a "creative process," or a problem-solving activity between citizens. As he explains in the Antidosis, "When danger threatens the state, the state must call upon those who speak best upon the question at issue and act upon their advice" (248). Indeed, throughout his works Isocrates regards his teachings and works as philosophia, suggesting his belief that the intellectual rigor of philosophy can and must be employed in the public as well as the private realm. Because of this, Isocrates dismisses the forensic speeches of his youth. He claims that in the Athenian courtroom, there is no problem to be debated since once the judges have heard the discourse of the accuser, they have already made up their minds. Thus forensic discourse becomes a one-sided distortion of the case at hand. Isocrates will conclude that such language practices will lead many an innocent citizen to an unjust sentence.

For Isocrates, the most useful discourse is that which has a social end, even if that end is to maintain the hegemonic structure. In reading Isocrates' Helen, for example, it is clear that in praising Theseus' slaying of the bull over Heracles' procuring the apples of the Hesperides and other tasks, Isocrates is privileging deeds that benefit society versus deeds that benefit one's reputation. While Theseus act saved the people of Attica, Heracles act had "no benefit to humankind, but only danger to himself" (24). Such a view can also be tied to Isocrates' discourse theory, for in On the Peace, he urges young men to "speak and write the kind of discourse by which they turn the greatest of states . . . [to] the paths of virtue and justice" (145). And although Isocrates privileges the Hellas above all else, he is not suggesting that individuals do not play a role in governance. Rather, the role of the citizen is

to pursue the study of logos to attain wisdom and involvement in their culture in order to benefit the Hellas as well as themselves (Antidosis 49-54).

While cultivating the mind through philosophy is the path toward wisdom, it is clear than in addition to the money to pay for such cultivation, one must have a natural ability. Isocrates claims that "All knowledge yields itself up to us only after great effort on our part, and we are by no means all equally capable of working out in practice what we learn" (201). But although for Isocrates natural ability is "paramount," a stance which closely aligns him with Plato, he still holds that language is a knowledge-generating process, as the answers to questions are not already present within a person's mind, regardless of her natural ability. Isocrates notes in Against the Sophists that the future is a thing unseen, implying that truth is unfixed and subject to dialogue, even if that dialogue is internal. And he acknowledges in the Antidosis that it is not in human nature to know positively what to do or say but claims that anyone who can arrive at the best course deserves the title of philosopher.

Furthermore, Isocrates acknowledges not only the effect social institutions may have upon discourse but the effect discourse may have on social institutions. For example, Isocrates is well aware that his message against Athenian imperialism in On the Peace is potentially dangerous when he says that "I know it is hazardous to oppose your views, and although this is a free government, there exists no freedom of speech" (14). He castigates the Athenians for allowing orators to speak only positive, flattering words and admits his own perplexity over whether to speak the discourses which are agreeable or those which are profitable for society to hear.

Overall, Isocrates' educational theory favors social interaction through language, as well as probable rather than absolute knowledge. Speaking of other educators, Isocrates states that "They ought to instruct their pupils in the practical affairs of our government, bearing in mind that likely conjecture about useful things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless" (Helen 3-7). In Against the Sophists, Isocrates further condemns teachers both for claiming to teach moral qualities Isocrates believes unteachable and for teaching discourse as if it could be learned as one learns the alphabet. Isocrates uses this comparison to argue that while the same letters can be used repeatedly in all situations, the same discourses cannot. Thus Isocrates' view of language use is that it is situational and not absolutely determined.

And although Isocrates views discourse as the product of sociopolitical exigency--not unlike Bitzer's rhetorical situation--he appears equally interested in the ability of language to create a social collective, in this case good, virtuous citizens devoted to the maintenance and supervision of the polis, but able to question its actions as well. Isocrates--also not unlike Kenneth Burke--contends that it is language that separates the chaotic world of animals from the ordered world of humans when he claims that "We are in no respect superior to other living creatures . . . but because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have founded cities and made laws, and invented arts (Antidosis 253-256). Ultimately, for Isocrates "There is no institution devised by humans which the power of speech has not helped us to establish" (256). In other words, what logos has given humanity is the means to interact and survive amid chaos.

Moving toward contemporary composition pedagogy, the question to ask now is how might Isocrates' specific educational theories, and general sophistic theories, work in the classroom. Despite the paradigm shift from product to process approaches to writing, there is still one element often missing from our composition classrooms: the emphasis on public discourse. As S. Michael Halloran has explained, today's composition courses do not always give students the chance to see themselves as political beings capable through language of asking questions, forming judgments, and instituting change within the sociopolitical framework. Hence composition pedagogies should include an emphasis not only on expressive or academic discourse but also on public discourse, i.e. discourse on sociopolitical, multicultural issues that will enable students to view writing less as an assignment for English class--with no use beyond the classroom--and more as a creative, dialectical process that allows them, as citizens, to test their views and draw situational conclusions based on arguments from numerous cultural perspectives. Yet such tasks necessitate that students be as involved in pedagogical strategies as their teachers. Ultimately, classroom as well as public issues should be determined through student-teacher collaboration within the first few weeks of a course, rather than relying the traditional but not very flexible fifteen-week syllabus, where topics are established prior to student enrollment.

And while students should be aware of such global and national issues as nuclear power, the environment, or censorship, students should be able to place these issues in a context connected to their own lives and their immediate collegiate community. For example, if a class chooses to tackle the issue of smoking, the teacher should work with them to determine (1) what problems exist on their own campus or in the community and (2) what

localized audiences hold particular perspectives or are better able--because of involvement or position--to discuss and possibly resolve some of the potential problems associated with the issue.

There are numerous options for making the composition classroom a more sociopolitical forum, including the following pedagogical strategies. The first involves an oral forum. Before a student has had a chance to develop a fixed position in writing, an instructor can assign particular perspectives on a given issue. Students can then be sectioned into small groups and asked to develop a communal stance on the topic. After students have prepared such a stance, they should be prepared to discuss the issue with an opposing group. Students should have the opportunity to shift stance and acknowledge the positions they originally opposed. With all classroom dialogues completed, the instructor can have students write brief reaction papers to the whole process in which they justify their revised position based on a discussion all sides of the issue. The formal writing assignment could then be a letter or report to one of the local policy-making or advocate audiences, which the students actually send, as Isocrates himself did.

To this point I have been stressing an oral medium--one of the easier ways for student to hear multiple perspectives--and a method that Isocrates' himself advocated as a goal of logon paideia. Yet as more and more English departments equip themselves with computer labs, electronic forums such as e-mail, bulletin boards, and newsgroups are more possible with the composition classroom. As Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe have recently claimed, students need the opportunity to engage in "written conversation," to publicly test their assertions and critiques in a way that a traditional, teacher-centered classroom may inhibit. In an electronic discussion, every

student has the ability to voice their concerns about the issue or reading at hand: they cannot be interrupted by other classmates, and they have the opportunity to receive responses--pro and con--to their view. Further, there is less emphasis on the monologic authority of the teacher but more emphasis on the students as a community with different perspectives, perspectives often based on race, gender, and class. Cooper and Selfe contend that "Students become much more likely to question their own opinions . . . and to learn how knowledge develops when different opinions and ideas come into contact. They learn the usefulness of trying out different perspectives and different hypotheses" (857). Many electronic forums enable both the initial dissent that is necessary for arriving at any assent and the ability to access information to further inform students' decision-making processes. In this sense, oral and electronic forums become neo-sophistic and Isocratean in that they encourage dialogue in the public rather than private realm.

While Jarratt, Neel, and Halloran have expressed concern that the political, public emphasis is absent from much composition pedagogy, James Berlin has suggested that citizenship is an achievable goal in the composition classroom, contending that writing courses "prepare students for assuming their political responsibilities as leaders or simply as active participants" (189). Such was the educational goal of Isocrates. In teaching political discourse as a public dialectic on significant political issues, Isocrates upholds the social, collaborative, and epistemic nature of language, and falls within both Jarratt and Neel's conceptions of a sophistic educator. Too often today's students expect and accept monologic pedagogies in which "the truth" is passed from teacher to student and has no relevance beyond the assignment at hand.

Thus we must help our writing students realize that their voices can become part of the dialogue about local student and community issues, including sexual harassment, smoking policies, recycling, and so forth. Oral and electronic forums are as necessary as written forums to help ensure that untested opinions are publicly debated and privately questioned before a position is taken. As Isocrates realized, such language practices help societies avoid tyranny and help create citizens who maintain democracy through their participation within it.

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